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THE PREPARATION OF MATERIALS FOR THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY.

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A PAPER PRESENTED AT A TWO-PART CONFERENCE ON PLANNING AND OPERATING LANGUAGE LABORATORIES WAS REPORTED. THE TOPIC OF THE PAPER WAS THE PREPARATION AND USE OF LABORATORY MATERIALS. DISCUSSIONS WERE INCLUDED ON (1) THE NEED FOR MATERIALS, (2) CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD MATERIALS, (3) CONTENT OF MATERIAL, (4) ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS, (5) USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS, AND (6) STUDIO RECORDINGS. THE CONCLUSION INDICATED THAT GOOD LANGUAGE LABORATORY MATERIALS ARE GENERALLY LACKING, WHILE THE NEED FOR SUCH MATERIALS IS INCREASING AS MORE LABORATORIES ARE BEING INSTALLED. THIS DOCUMENT IS PART OF A SERIES, ED 003 919 - ED 003 924, AND ED 003 926. (RS)

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THE PREPARATION OF MATERIALS FOR THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

Pierre J. Capretz

THE NEED FOR MATERIALS

There are now thousands of language laboratories throughout the country and new ones are being installed every day. There are few college language departments that do not pride themselves on having some kind of language laboratory: a victory has been won but it is a dangerous one for we are not prepared to take advantage of the ground we have gained and to exploit fully our success.

We have heard that some expensively equipped laboratories have fallen into disuse and that many of them are improperly used for lack of competent staff and, above all, for lack of suitable materials.

And in fact there are few such materials available today. The bulk of textbooks now on the market were designed for the traditional approach to language teaching, at a time when laboratories were not known, or written by authors who lacked sufficient experience with laboratory techniques. The majority of recently published texts, especially elementary texts, are accompanied by full sets of recordings and claim to be made for "laboratory use", but such claims cannot be taken at face value. In fact a great number of these texts are old ones which have been more or less hastily and superficially "revamped" and the recordings that accompany them are in most cases nothing but a mere "taping" of the narratives or dialogues, vocabulary lists and traditional exercises, showing more concern with pronunciation practice than with communication skills. Such recordings will prove more valuable to conscientious teachers who will use them to check their own pronunciation before meeting their class, than to the students

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themselves.

Of course, the few institutions which have been experimenting with laboratory techniques for the past ten or twelve years have developed, over that period of time, course materials especially geared to the use of a laboratory, but these materials are hardly available to other institutions except through occasional courteous loans. Their general publication is hindered by several factors: the authors of some of them may think that, even after years or so of constant trial and error they have not yet reached a sufficiently perfected form to justify public release. Even if the materials have reached the desirable point of perfection they are hardly "publishable" precisely because they have been especially made for laboratory use. This means that they consist mostly of tape recordings with no, or relatively little, printed material except for the teacher's use. Now, textbook publishers are equipped and accustomed to sell <u>printed</u> words, not spoken ones. In as much as they have recently made an effort to publish tape recordings they have done so only because it is difficult today to market a language textbook which is not "accompanied" by some kind of recordings. They have had to assume this supplementary expense without any hope of making a profit on the sale or rental of the recordings themselves. Such recordings are fairly expensive to produce, and though they can be copyrighted, are too easy to duplicate for the copyright to be strictly enforced. Finally, only one set is needed for one school over a period of several years, while, during the same time, several hundreds of textbooks could be sold. At present the tape recordings represent for the publishers an expensive and therefore unwelcome adjunct to the traditional textbooks, and it will probably take some time before commercial publishers are able to market good recorded language course materials with no conventional textbooks attached.

In the present dearth of good course materials especially designed for use in the language laboratory, hundreds of language departments are striving to produce their own materials. In a way, this is a regrettable situation

since many of the teachers involved have neither the time nor the facilities required for such an undertaking. It is not enough to be an excellent teacher and to know how to operate a tape recorder for one to be able to produce a good recording for effective laboratory use.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD MATERIALS FOR USE IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

Perfection

One of the most obvious advantages of the language laboratory is that it provides endless repetition of the same item which can be heard by each student as often as necessary and by as many students as are enrolled in the course, not only in one particular year, but also in subsequent years. Any slight error or imperfection, instead of being vaguely noticed, once, by the students of the class (or rather, by those among them who happen to be listening at the time) will affect all present and future students and affect them repeatedly. Besides, the materials recorded on tape enjoy somewhat the same prestige as the printed page. "That's what they said on the tape." is often given by students as an argument just as weighty as "It's in the book." The impact of each fragment of the materials recorded for use in the laboratory will be multiplied an incalculable number of times. It follows that such recorded materials should be perfect, or as nearly perfect as the best human competence, aided by the best machines can make them.

Since the main advantage of the laboratory is that it makes possible the exposure of the student to massive doses of the spoken foreign language through the process of repetition, the materials to be used in the lab must be so designed as to encourage students to take advantage of this possibility. This means that the materials must be as interesting and pleasant to listen to as possible; therefore a high technical quality of recording and carefully organized contents are necessary.

Technical quality of recording

The technical quality of sound reproduction encountered in most laboratory installations leaves much to be desired. This is due to the fact that the manufacturers prefer to sell mediocre equipment for a high price than good equipment for the same or a slightly higher price. For this reason, unfortunately, several laboratory equipment firms have helped spread the erroneous idea that, since language laboratory equipment is used only to reproduce the human voice, a limited fidelity is sufficient for the purpose. This reasoning, sometimes backed by the example of the telephone which succeeds in transmitting understandable messages through a very poor frequency range, fails to recognize that it is one thing to comprehend a message in a language that one already knows, and quite another thing to perceive the same in an imperfectly known language. Obviously a much higher fidelity is necessary in the second case. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that the differences between some sounds of English and of French, for example, can be distinguished only if very high frequencies are present (on the order of 11,500 cps). On that score the flat frequency response of 40 to 8,000 cps often proposed as desirable for language laboratory equipment is quite insufficient.

Even if high quality of the recordings were not thus justified by the necessity of reproducing <u>all</u> the sounds of the target language in such a way as they might be clearly distinguished from similar English sounds, high fidelity of reproduction should be insisted upon as a means of making the recording more appealing and less tiring to listen to. It is enough to listen to an old cranky phonograph after one of the latest, expensive "hi-fi" record player systems to realize how much more one can "take" of the second.

It goes without saying that the best recording will not sound good if it is played on poor laboratory equipment, but it is just as obvious that a mediocre recording will not sound any better if it is played on poor equipment...and not even if it is played on good equipment.

In conclusion, the recordings for the language laboratory should be made under the best physical conditions, in a good, sound-proof, but not too "dead" studio, on the best recording equipment and, if possible, with the help of a competent technician.

The too common practice of cutting recordings on the same mediocre equipment which is used in the laboratory should be discouraged. (If the playback system is mediocre the recording system is usually even worse.)

CONTENTS

Integration of laboratory and classroom work

The materials used in the language laboratory must be closely related to what is done in class. The time spent in the laboratory is needed to reinforce whatever learning has taken place in the classroom, and students must realize that whatever they are doing in the laboratory has a direct bearing on class work and will enable them to perform well in class. This can be achieved only if laboratory and class materials have been conceived together, at the same time, as parts of one carefully planned course. The structures and vocabulary studied must be presented many times in as many and various ways as possible until they are completly mastered. This process must be begun in class and continued in the laboratory. Almost all of the numerous techniques for presenting materials in the laboratory can be used with profit if the structures and vocabulary presented are precisely those under study in class at that time or "re-entries."

At the elementary level the tapes should present the basic text, dialogue or narrative of each lesson, recorded at normal speed and with pauses and repetitions: adaptationsof the same dialogues or narratives; directed dialogues; comprehension and speaking drills; pattern drills; questions and answers; all of them bearing on the same linguistic problems. At a more advanced level, dictation drills should be added and, when reading assignments are given, each assignment should be recorded in as clear and dramatic a way as pos-

sible so that the students may hear the new text before they read it, and may be helped in understanding it by all the clues given by a good reading (intonations, breaking up of the sentences). It is very important that the pattern drills presented on the tapes be based on the text studied in class. Certainly, they must bear on patterns encountered in those texts, but the vocabulary items used to make up various examples of the same pattern must also be taken from currently or recently studied texts; and each item in the pattern drills must refer to the "situation" provided by the texts. In this way the difficulty most often encountered in pattern drills is overcome: each item instead of being an isolated, meaningless, artificial utterance becomes meaningful by reference to a text known to the students.

Nature of the linguistic material

With the audio-lingual approach the linguistic material taught must evidently belong to the spoken language and not to the written style. However, though the audio-lingual approach is now almost universally accepted, most of the audio-lingual materials (or so called audio-lingual materials) produced up to now use a language which is too obviously influenced by the written style propagated by traditional courses. Whence those disconcerting phrases that pop up all of a sudden in the middle of a dialogue or of a pattern drill. They may be perfectly correct, in keeping with all the rules of the best grammar books, and might even be found perhaps in some literary text of the nineteenth century... but no one would ever say them today under normal circumstances. There is much work to be done if one is to weed such discrepancies out of some of the best audio-lingual teaching materials available today.

Among the several levels of spoken language, that used in daily life, under normal circumstances, by a cultured native should be preferred for an elementary course. In more advanced courses lower and higher levels of speech may be gradually introduced at least for comprehension.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS

Whatever the technique used, the materials should be so designed as to demand of the students some kind of active participation. Being exposed to the spoken language for a long time may induce a certain amount of learning even if the student is merely hearing without listening actively, but it is obvious that more will be learned if the student applies his mind to it. Means have then to be found to force the student to listen actively and to perform in some way.

Oral responses. The most obvious way is to ask the student to respond orally either by merely repeating what he hears or by introducing some change in the stimulus. In designing this type of exercise, three rules should be kept in mind:

a) each response of the student should be followed by a model response so that the last element in the series be the model answer and not the student's performance: the model should speak last.

b) such drills must remain drills and not degenerate into quizzes; the purpose of a drill being not to <u>test</u> the student or to challenge his intellectual ability but to <u>teach</u> him. The stimuli must not become riddles and the student must be able to find the correct response without having to "rack his brain" for it. The student response must be fairly obvious to him and completely controlled.

c) a fairly rapid rhythm has to be maintained throughout the exercises. A lively rhythm will keep the student on his toes, will challenge him and prevent boredom. Furthermore, the purpose of these drills being to build up verbal automatisms, the student must respond in an automatic way without preparing his answer through an elaborate discursive process, and, finally, the student must get in the habit of speaking the foreign language at normal speed. The pauses have then to be carefully measured to give the student just enough time to enunciate the utterance at the same speed as it was spoken by the model voice, plus a certain "reaction time," which will vary according to the kind of students for whom the recordings are prepared, but which should always be kept to a minimum.

Graphic response. We mean by this some kind of check mark which the student places on a specially prepared sheet, for example, to answer

yes or no to an aural question or true or false to an aural statement, or to identify an utterance with one of the lines of writing which he finds on his sheet. This type of response is particularly well adapted to auditory discrimination drills and listening comprehension. It must be recalled here again that this technique is not used as a quiz but as part of a drill; the re-confirming and re-inforcing "solution" is given as soon as the student has had time to perform.

Written response. As soon as students have begun writing in the foreign language, written responses to aural stimuli are an excellent way of fixing their attention. Of course, such written responses should take only a small proportion of the total time spent in the laboratory, the preponderance being left to aural-oral work. Furthermore, written responses should be used only in the later part of each recording when materials being studied have been thoroughly drilled orally. These written responses may take various forms such as regular dictations or spot dictations where a partial text is given on a mimeographed sheet with blanks which the student has to fill in as he hears the text spoken. This spot dictation technique can be used in order to call the student's attention to important points in an aural comprehension drill: the key words (those which we have to catch in order to get the meaning of the message) are left blank; the others (which can be supplied automatically by our mind if they have not been actually perceived) are given on the mimeographed sheet. This technique can obviously be used to call the student's attention to points of spelling, but also to any structural or phonological item under study at the time. Let us suppose that a recording for an intermediate course in French has drilled the phrase avoir beau plus verb. At the conclusion of the tape lesson the students will be asked to take a mimeographed sheet on which appears a series of numbered sentences from which one or a number of words has been deleted. The sentences are heard via the tape and the students are asked to write down the missing word or words which may be at first the proper form of the verb avoir. Then, in a second group of sentences, the infinitive verb that follows avoir beau, and in a third group the

negative statement which always follows the phrase avoir beau plus infinitive. In all cases a key must be provided (on the back of the sheet or printed upside down at the bottom) for immediate checking.

Mechanical response. This type of response, which could have been discussed first in as much as it is applicable even to the pre-writing and pre-reading stages of language instruction, is mentioned last because it has been, thus far, much less used than the others. It requires special equipment usually not found in language laboratories at present and brings us into the field of the Teaching Machine which may be considered as the wished-for or dreaded ultimate avatar of the language laboratory. In this technique the student responds to aural stimuli by pressing one or more buttons which actuate an auditory or visual signal and a counter to keep track of the number of correct responses. Thus, immediate feed-back or response confirmation is possible. But these techniques have as yet been the object of too little experimentation to be considered here.

USE OF "AUTHENTIC" MATERIALS

If one of the great advantages of the language laboratory is that it allows a greater exposure of the student to the spoken language than can be achieved in the classroom, a no less important one is that it enables the student to escape the limits of the classroom and to have access not to "classroom-French" or German or Spanish, but to real French, German or Spanish--to the language as it is spoken in real situations, by natives, with all the natural intonations, rhythm and "punch"; not as it is decorticated, emasculated and otherwise adulterated in the typical classroom situation.

Such "authentic" language must be preferred to its professorial imitation, not only for authenticity's sake but because an "authentic" utterance has incomparably more relief than a professorial one. It has, so to speak, an added dimension; it is more meaningful to the student, it has a greater impact on him; it is not boring and, for these reasons, it is better learned. Curse words, per-

haps, are the most readily learned elements of any language precisely because they represent the quintessence of the "authentic" utterance.

Ideal language laboratory materials would be made up exclusively of authentic materials. Good language laboratory materials certainly must include a high proportion of "authentic" speech. This can be taped from different sources: conversations recorded in the foreign country preferably without the knowledge of the speakers; in private home; stores; restaurants; streets, etc. Recordings of good modern plays; film sound-tracks; radio programs; and commercial recordings such as "sound archives", "sound magazines," etc.

Of course, such documents cannot be used "as they come" (except perhaps for listening comprehension drills and tests at the higher level), but some elements can be carefully selected and edited for student consumption. It is indeed a time consuming and costly proposition but worth the effort.

STUDIO RECORDINGS

That part of the language laboratory materials which has to be recorded in the studio should try to duplicate "authentic" speech as closely as possible.

Speakers. This means that only "native" speakers should be used. (By "native" we do not mean necessarily speakers who happen to have been born within the boundaries of the country whose language is concerned, but speakers whose command of the language and whose accent is such that they can be mistaken for natives by the natives themselves.) If it were necessary to defend this obvious principle, one might remark that we do not aim at teaching our students any kind of American-French, or American-German or American-Spanish (that is, North American-Spanish), but <u>real</u> French-French, <u>real</u> German-German, etc. Therefore, even the fact that probably few of our students will ever achieve anything else but some kind of "American-French" is no excuse for <u>offering</u> them American-French as a model!

If it is impossible to offer to all students a one hundred per cent authentic model to imitate in the classroom, it can be done in the laboratory and should be done. Nor will just any "native" do as a "voicer" of good language laboratory tapes. Speakers must have good, pleasant voices; clear and distinct enunciations; forceful delivery and good dramatic talent since they must not so much "read" but act their parts. They must impart color to every item of any pattern drill and render it an "authentic" utterance produced in a real situation. They must be able to do their job without being bored, or, at least, give the impression that they are not bored but enjoying every minute of it.

Every language is spoken by "natives" with a great variety of accents all equally "authentic." As far as aural comprehension is concerned it will be good to offer the students a fair sampling of these various accents, but it will be preferable to choose one of them for studied imitation. Whereas it is generally agreed to choose, in French, a "cultural Parisian" accent, for Spanish the choice is a much more difficult one between Castilian or one of the South American varieties.

A good recording should offer several voices, at least two, preferably male and female, to accustom the student to different ways of speaking the language and to make it more realistic and lively.

Editing. The necessity of editing is obvious when "authentic" materials are used since such materials can practically never be used in their original state. The usable fragments have to be taken out of the original recording and re-combined in a proper sequence; pauses and repetitions have to be introduced, etc., etc. Editing is also necessary with studio recordings to eliminate all flaws, but also to introduce pauses and repetitions. Pauses and repetitions can be recorded in the studio, but this technique, while saving time, is not really satisfactory. The necessity of leaving pauses makes it impossible for one

to speak naturally, particularly whenever utterances have to be broken up into segments. A speaker asked to repeat an utterance several times will almost inevitably be unable to give two identical versions of it, the intonation pattern being altered each time. These drawbacks will be eliminated if the text is recorded once in a natural way and then manipulated to introduce pauses and repetitions through editing. This procedure is particularly important for dictation drills and tests, especially if they are considered as drills and tests in listening comprehension as much as in spelling. Nothing but the most unnatural kind of speech can be expected of one who "dictates," breaking up sentences, leaving pauses...and giving punctuation!

For similar reasons, it is very difficult to make pauses of the right length when one has to make them in the studio, during the original recording. Pauses, however, can be measured more accurately when they are introduced through editing. Editing can be done with scissors and splicer or by copying from one machine to another. The best results are achieved with the first method if the recordings are made at a sufficient speed (7.5 or 15 ips) and if "recorded silence" is used to make up the pauses, but it is extremely time-consuming. The second method requires two well matched machines of very high fidelity in order to minimize the inevitable loss of quality which takes place whenever a recording is duplicated. One of the two machines at least must provide instantaneous stop and start of tape travel.

We are now studying a machine into which a "natural" recording, without pauses, will be fed and which will itself introduce, in the correct places, pauses of a predetermined length (any multiple of the original utterance or the same length as the utterance plus a constant "reaction time"). We hope the same machine eventually will be able to introduce any number of repetitions of any utterance in the original recording.

CONCLUSION

Few good materials are now available for use in language laboratories and the need for such materials is felt more and more acutely every day, as more and more laboratories are being installed throughout the country.

Really suitable materials cannot be prepared overnight and by anybody. Their construction requires expertise in language laboratory methods and techniques; familiarity with the recent contributions of pure and applied linguistics and not only a thorough working knowledge of the target language but also a "feel" for it which will avoid use of any "unnatural" utterances. The recording and editing require a perfected complex of equipment and a variety of skills and talents hardly to be expected in a single individual. For these reasons it is practically impossible for individual teachers with limited time and facilities to produce good laboratory materials.

Commercial publishers <u>can</u> be expected to provide such good materials for use in a language laboratory but only if they completely change their traditional practices and become organized to sell tape recordings supplemented by work sheets (to be distributed to the students at the proper time) and detailed teachers' guides, rather than the traditional textbooks accompanied by some associated recordings. These materials cannot be adaptations of traditional textbooks but must be conceived, from the beginning, as audio-lingual materials to be used in conjunction with a language laboratory, and constructed by a team of experienced specialists. In addition, they should not be released before having been tested and evaluated for at least two years in a number of different institutions. Commissioning the construction, testing and perfecting of such materials is such a costly undertaking that no commercial publisher may want to risk it. And it might not be very wise to risk it either, for it is not absolutely certain that satisfactory results could be achieved!

Teachers who have been preparing language laboratory materials for the past ten years or so have developed a certain know-how, and some of them have become kinds of artists in special fields. Also, numerous precepts have been doctorally formulated deciding "once and for all" how good laboratory materials should be constructed. But in spite of this, it is our belief that a wide field remains open to experimentation since most of our ideas on how to organize a good recording rest on theoretical reasoning, limited experience or simply personal prejudice which, for lack of better sources of information, have been exalted to the status of revealed Truth.

Objective experimentation is badly needed and this cannot be carried out by single individuals working within the limits of one institution, but only if organized on a national scale in a purely scientific spirit. It would seem that good materials can be effectively prepared only by non-commercial research teams subsidized by the Government--such as the Modern Language Materials Center--or by institutions of higher learning working together with the help of generous grants.

Meanwhile, our profession is faced with an extremely serious situation. In the absence of adequate materials, a mass of unsatisfactory materials is being produced and used, which may have disastrous consequences. In order to solve partially this problem it might be advisable to create a national Modern Language Recording Center where a team of experts using the best equipment available, would produce, at cost, good recordings for individual teachers, and, eventually, for commercial publishers.